


Identifying the Dimensions and Components of Health Tourism with a Strategic Business Orientation Approach Using Thematic Analysis

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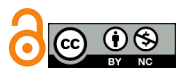
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ABSTRACT

Objective: The main objective of this article is to identify the dimensions and components of health tourism with a strategic business orientation approach using thematic analysis.

Method: The research method is qualitative. In addition to documentary studies, the thematic analysis technique with MAXQDA12 software was used to identify factors and components. The population in this study consisted of all experts in the field of tourism and health, as well as senior managers with extensive experience and a high track record in the field of tourism and health, after which theoretical saturation was achieved following 14 interviews. The interviews lasted between 75 to 120 minutes. Ultimately, basic, organizing, and comprehensive themes were extracted.

Findings: Five factors (developmental, strategic, infrastructural, limiting, and outcomes) and 20 dimensions (organizing themes) and 43 components and 208 indicators for health tourism with a strategic business orientation were extracted.

Conclusion: The results showed that the majority of experts believed that health tourism with a strategic business orientation faces issues in structural areas and domestic policies, and these factors have the most significant impact in this regard.

Keywords: *Tourism, Health Tourism, Strategic Business Orientation.*

1 Introduction

Globalization represents a significant shift for the international economy (Asgari savadjani et al., 2021). Changes in production and economic management, as well as the liberation of investment potentials, have led to the intensified integration of the global economy, with cities

simultaneously transitioning from industrial production centers to service hubs offering banking and financial services, healthcare, education, media, and tourism. In this context, tourism is one of the most significant phenomena undergoing transformation, attracting considerable attention. Nowadays, tourism is among the few service

sectors providing substantial opportunities for global trade, accessible to nations regardless of their development level (Rezaei Pitenoeci et al., 2021). This subtle point has contributed to the growth of this service category, so much so that tourism is referred to as an industry, ranked third in revenue generation globally, following the oil and automobile industries. In fact, this industry, in the modern era, has the capacity to influence the process of balanced and rational development worldwide, attracting the attention of a wide range of policymakers, planners of political systems, and executive managers in various countries (Ghafari et al., 2022). The international growth on one hand, and increasing interest in tourist destinations on the other, have led to the emergence of various forms of tourism such as cultural and educational tourism, religious tourism, urban tourism, rural tourism, sports tourism, and health tourism (Küçükambak, 2023). Among different tourism sectors, health tourism and its subcategories, due to their competitive advantages, have gained significant attention and are showing rapid growth among types of tourism. Health tourism has emerged as a new market in the tourism industry, experiencing increasing growth in recent years (Jalilian et al., 2022). It is estimated that each health tourist generates three times the revenue of a regular tourist. Additionally, achieving the objectives set in the fifth and sixth development plans and the vision document, as a legal requirement, highlights another aspect of the importance of health tourism (Khoshandam Shourcheh & Shojaei, 2021).

Based on studies in the field of health tourism, this industry can be divided into three types: wellness tourism (traveling to health villages and areas with mineral and hot springs, for relaxation from daily life stresses and rejuvenation without medical intervention or supervision); therapeutic tourism and medical tourism (travel for the treatment of physical illnesses or undergoing some form of surgery under the supervision of doctors in hospitals and treatment centers) (Mohammadi, 2022). Health tourists include individuals and groups traveling for the use of climate change (for medical and therapeutic purposes), mineral waters, convalescence, treatment, and the like (Omidi et al., 2022; Rezaei Pitenoeci et al., 2021). Many patients also seek treatment at major and reputable medical centers in advanced countries or capitals of countries with health and wellness facilities. This type of tourism has gained considerable credibility and popularity. On a macro level, governments are interested in benefiting from the economic advantages of this industry (Bakir & Çakır, 2023). Today, there is increasing competition among different countries, especially Asian developing countries, to

attract health tourists, which has become a global trade. Furthermore, health tourism has also gained more popularity in developing countries. Globalization and the liberalization of trade in health services have laid the groundwork for the rapid growth of this type of tourism (Baran & Karaca, 2023). If health tourism is considered a priority, Iran has the potential to prevent the outflow of foreign currency and human resources to other countries (Kaya, 2023). Factors such as changes in consumer values, demographic changes, an aging population, and the demands of the healthcare service system are considered the main drivers behind the emergence of health tourism (Baran & Karaca, 2023). These factors have made health tourism one of the fastest-growing types of tourism today (Baysal & Çimen, 2023). Given the importance of health tourism in the development of tourism and trade, and considering the subject's significance, analyzing the state of health tourism and the limited and scattered research conducted in connection with health tourism can be beneficial in adopting measures towards identifying and improving priority areas, enhancing commercial capabilities in this industry, and ultimately attracting more health tourism. This research aims to assist the health tourism industry in Iran by developing a comprehensive model of health tourism with a strategic business orientation approach. In this direction, a question that occupies the researcher's mind is what dimensions and components can be identified for health tourism?

2 Methods and Materials

In the qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews, indicators, components, dimensions, and factors were identified through thematic analysis. Participants in the research included experts in the fields of tourism and health care, as well as managers of tourism and health care organizations with relevant educational qualifications or who have articles, books, publications, and also teaching experience in this field. Entry criteria were experts with at least three years of university experience in tourism and health care fields, specialists with at least a doctoral degree in tourism and health care fields and titles related to the research, and managers of tourism and health care organizations. The sampling method was purposive. In this sampling method, cases are selected non-randomly and with a specific purpose.

The interviews were conducted during the summer and autumn of 2021. The average duration of the interviews was 73 minutes. After transcribing the interviews, thematic

analysis was used to analyze the data concurrently with data collection.

Initially, the tape texts were transcribed, then a version of the extracted codes was sent to the interviewee for confirmation. To familiarize with the data and immerse, the data were read several times, thereby identifying the initial themes and similar initial themes were grouped together, forming the initial categories. These categories merged together to form themes. Additionally, to ensure the accuracy of the collected data, there was a long-term and in-depth engagement with the data. Moreover, two other researchers, in addition to the main researchers, participated in data analysis. The researchers read the manuscripts for coding and categorization confirmation. Participants were revisited to increase the confirmability. Having maximum variation in sampling and long encounters were other ways to increase data credibility. From the initial interview, sub-themes and categories were formed, and then data reduction continued in all analysis units (themes) until themes

emerged. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation of the data was reached. Qualitative content analysis was performed using MAXQDA12 software. In this research, obtaining informed consent, maintaining identity information, and adherence to fidelity in transcribing interview content were considered ethical considerations.

3 Findings and Results

Out of the total of 14 expert participants in this research, 8 were faculty members in the fields of tourism and health care, and 6 were managers of tourism and health care organizations. The qualitative content analysis process was used to identify the dimensions and components of health tourism. In this process, 208 initial codes (indicators) were extracted. Through multiple reviews and merging of codes based on similarity over several stages, ultimately 43 components and 5 dimensions for health tourism with a strategic business orientation approach were extracted.

Table 1

Summary of Qualitative Results

Factors	Main Themes	Sub-themes	Components
Developing Factors	Healthcare costs	Healthcare service costs	Costs of surgical and treatment services
			Costs of cosmetic procedures
			Costs of dental services
			Costs of eye care services
			Costs of transplant services (bone marrow, liver transplants)
			Costs of stem cell treatment and spinal cord injury repair
			Costs of infertility treatment
			Costs of radiology, imaging, and MRI services
			Affordable hotel prices within Iran
			Costs of food and beverages
	Insurance coverage	Medical insurance coverage	Costs of internal and external transportation
			Travel insurance for all tourists
		Health tourism insurance coverage	Comprehensive insurance coverage for all tourist services
			Cost-effectiveness of insurance services
	Medical and hospital service capacities	Medical and general service capacities of hospitals	Insurance coverage for long-term stays
			Insurance coverage for patient transportation
		Specialized service capacities of hospitals	Insurance coverage for tourist attractions and pilgrimage sites
			Modern medical equipment
	Motivational factors	Pull factors (destination country)	Provision of fast medical visas through hospitals
			Provision of online medical services
			Quick appointment scheduling
			VIP services for patients
			VIP services for patient companions
			Variety of treatment options
			Medical costs
			Correct advertising for health services provision
			Medical facilities
			Strong hospital equipment

Underlying Factors	Environmental factors	Push factors (origin country)	Natural tourist destinations (springs and caves with hot water) High treatment costs Lack of medical insurance Shortage of skilled doctors Shortage of reputable hospitals Shortage of medical equipment Domestic and international policies	
		Economic factors	Economic recession Unemployment rate Currency fluctuations Severe price increases	
		Political-security factors	Continuous changes in prices, especially in treatment International security in the region Sanctions conditions Kidnapping of tourists International security in the region Internal disturbances Domestic political actions and reactions Political stability Internal and external security Security threat	
		Cultural-tourism factors	Political stability Cultural-historical artifacts Ancient artifacts Historical attractions Ethnic and cultural attractions Sports facilities Special events Handicrafts Cultural and customary factors Tangible and intangible cultural assets Cultural and customary factors Artificial tourist attractions Commercial attractions Multiplicity of parks Zoos	
		Organizational factors	Regional and local policies	Organizing specialized health tourism workshops and seminars Crisis management Visit management Managing the impact of health tourism
			General Policies	Unity of policy among policymaking institutions The importance and priority of health tourism for the government
		Domestic infrastructure	Macro (general) infrastructure and equipment	Coordination among tourism organizations Infrastructure and administrative equipment Infrastructure and educational equipment Medical infrastructure Modern hospitals Technological infrastructure Information technology infrastructure Infrastructure related to science and technology parks, growth centers, and market liaison offices Cultural infrastructure Welfare infrastructure
			Micro (specialized) infrastructure and equipment	Vision and mission formulation Having a knowledge brand Knowledge leadership Knowledge-driven organizational structure Attention to human resource management Proper financial resource management

Treatment costs	Location	Social capital Organizational learning Establishment of a health tourism management system Advertising and marketing Customer orientation Access to medical centers Defining travel routes Accurate identification of medical centers
	Promotion	Access to medical facilities Private rooms in hospitals Special services for patient companions Special services for patients Specialists in all fields Availability of all specialists in Tehran Availability of all specialists in one medical center Social media marketing Special services for patient companions Online social interactions Assurance and confidence in treatment Appointment scheduling duration for patients Patient waiting time
Promotion in treatment	Preventative processes	Wellness villages Suitable climate Travel activities such as massage and spa, etc.
	Natural factors	Hot springs Mineral hot waters Salt lakes Mud volcanoes Natural healing resources Favorable climate Therapeutic muds Natural landscapes
Health tourists	Tourist engagement	Tourists' perspective on travel Evaluation of facilities and equipment Assessment of destination conditions Waiting time assessment Acceptance and belief in travel Internal motivation for travel Accurate choice of tourism destination
	Tourist education	Precise information on travel costs to tourists Providing information on tourism destinations Travel map simulation by applications
Intention for repeat tourism	Tourist loyalty	Satisfaction with treatment Satisfaction with travel Recommendation to friends and acquaintances with similar intentions Repeat visit if necessary
	Tourist behavioral control	Opportunity creation Travel planning and design Preparation and securing resources (money, ticket reservations, etc.)
Domestic tourism services	Transportation	Development of transportation networks Quality and quantity of transportation networks Ease of transportation Facilities related to transportation of the disabled and patients Availability of the transportation system at the required time
	Information system	Web technology Integration of internal and external systems Internet status

		Accommodation and hygiene services	Information technology infrastructure Quality and quantity of hotels Conditions and facilities of hotels for patients and the disabled Roadside accommodations Accommodation indices for patients and companions Hygienic conditions of hotels and accommodations Desirable healthcare-medical infrastructure Food quality Emergency and pharmaceutical services of accommodations and hotels Natural and healthy foods Type of restaurant service Food costs Domestic healthy foods
Strategic Factors	Globalization of tourism	Standardization of health tourism services	Provision of services at international standards Equipping hotels and accommodations at an international level Provision of medical services at an international level
		Development of informational and advertising packages	Designing service introduction packages for hospitals Designing brochures to introduce doctors Introducing treatable diseases in the country Introducing welfare services
	Development of knowledge and service sharing policies	Global knowledge sharing	Participating in specialized health tourism exhibitions to gain international experience Designing specialized health tourism websites in various languages Implementing a system for registering tourist and international center information Introducing the capabilities of modern and traditional medical systems Adopting appropriate marketing strategies from target countries
Limiting Factors	Structural issues	Technology structures	Creating health townships Signing agreements with Free Zones Authority for the development of health tourism hospitals Signing agreements with the Broadcasting Organization for advertising abroad Lack of high-speed domestic internet Lack of free connection to international networks Internet bandwidth issues
		Geographic structures	Urban planning issues (lack of attention to city appearance to attract tourists) Climatic issues (drought)
	National and international regulations	National regulations	Visa regulations for specific countries (USA, Israel) Country's religious laws (hijab, alcohol, etc.)
		International regulations	Political sanctions on Iran Insecurity in neighboring countries
	Cultural challenges	Global challenges	Lack of people's proficiency in international languages (English) Lack of familiarity with the cultures of other countries
		Domestic challenges	Significant cultural differences between Iranian cities Use of different languages and dialects in Iran
Consequences	Payment system issues for tourists	Domestic payment system issues for tourists	Lack of connection to global payment systems (international credit cards)
		Foreign payment system issues for tourists	Financial sanctions on Iran Inability to make payments from outside Iran
	National consequences	Economic outcomes	High foreign exchange earnings Economic prosperity

		Creation of new job opportunities
		Reducing dependency on single-dimensional economies and their associated risks
	Social-cultural outcomes	Enhancement of domestic cultural level
		Familiarity with international cultures and languages
		Preservation of local cultures
		Cultural exchange with other countries
		Introducing other countries to Iran's local languages
		Introducing tourists to Iran's history
Health system level outcomes	New specializations	Doctors becoming acquainted with new diseases
		Familiarity with modern tools and equipment
		Development of practical knowledge
	International experiences	Awareness of rare diseases
		Understanding how to interact with patients (linguistic and cultural)
		Knowledge of global healthcare policies
	Information technology	Access to patients' medical records worldwide
		Developing telemedicine capabilities for consultations and follow-ups
		Interactive websites for service introduction and Q&A
		Capability for electronic financial transactions

4 Discussion and Conclusion

In this research, health tourism with a strategic business orientation approach comprises 5 general factors: 1- Development factor of health tourism with a strategic business orientation, 2- Infrastructural factor of health tourism with a strategic business orientation, 3- Strategic factor of health tourism with a strategic business orientation, 4- Limiting factors of health tourism with a strategic business orientation, 5- Outcomes of the development of health tourism with a strategic business orientation. These were examined and analyzed using thematic analysis methods. The posed question, "What are the dimensions and components of health tourism with a strategic business orientation?" led to the development of a new theory from 14 interviews for extracting themes in this area, as well as 20 dimensions, 43 components, and 208 indicators were extracted. This section aligns with the findings of previous research (Baran & Karaca, 2023; Majedi & Shayegh, 2021; Xu et al., 2023; Zahmatkesh Saredorahi et al., 2020).

Health tourism has been a focal point for many countries in recent years, especially in our country, where there has been a special emphasis on health tourism through speeches by relevant officials and the organization of seminars in this area. Stakeholders believe that Iran, due to its natural facilities and diverse, pristine nature in some areas, can allocate a larger share of tourists who travel for treatment and health enhancement (Abela, 2023). Over the past few years, the number of patients migrating abroad for medical services has significantly increased. Currently, this industry

is growing, and every country is claiming its share. Countries with extensive and advanced medical facilities such as hospitals, clinics, and other medical centers equipped with advanced medical devices, and staffed by doctors, specialists, surgeons, and other medical professionals aware of the latest global medical advancements and specialties, are the destinations for many patients seeking treatment and healing (Spoladore et al., 2023). With the shift from the traditional economy and intensifying competition, the continuity of organizations and markets depends on identifying and attracting new customers and retaining existing ones (Soofi & Aligholi, 2022). This objective is achievable through the correct and proper use of marketing strategies. Tourism is also an information-based activity; therefore, places and tourism products are heavily dependent on their introduction, description, and display of capabilities and facilities (Ridderstaat et al., 2019). The medical tourism market in the Middle East countries was worth \$1.24 billion in 2006 and grew at an average annual rate of 7.4% to reach \$3 billion in revenue by 2019 with 1.1 million medical tourists, making it one of the most attractive and profitable global markets currently (Abdolvand & Bani Asadi, 2019; Asgari savadjani et al., 2021). According to the World Health Organization's annual statistics, about \$50 billion is spent annually on the treatment of patients from the region in European and American countries. Attracting a percentage of this amount will have a significant impact on our country's medical tourism economy. While Iran's share of health tourism is \$400 to \$500 million per year, which is about 0.5% of the world, this amount is very insignificant

compared to the potentials in our country (Ghafari et al., 2022). Various reasons demonstrate that the service sector has experienced rapid growth in recent decades. One of these attractive and booming service markets is the medical tourism sector, which involves various service areas in this field; however, the lack of an effective platform for introducing and attracting medical tourists in our country has resulted in a meager share of this market. Therefore, based on the 2025 vision, Iran intends to attract about 20 million foreign tourists by the end of this year, and of the total number of tourists entering countries, 6 to 10 percent are those traveling for treatment and to use natural blessings. Iran, considering its advantages and capabilities in medical tourism, including low cost and unparalleled quality of medical services, intends to utilize the existing opportunities; on the other hand, it faces significant challenges in exploiting its capabilities in this area (Jalilian et al., 2022). Currently, our country is among the world leaders in some sciences, such as stem cells and spinal cord injury repair, and can compete with advanced countries in areas such as infertility, interventional radiology, kidney and liver transplants. The cost advantage of many services should be added to the above-mentioned quality advantages. Considering these advantages, the Fourth Development Plan law has designated increasing revenues from this type of tourism as a legal duty of the Ministry of Health (Omidi et al., 2022). Additionally, currently in our country, 472 hot springs welcome health tourists, and 4 to 7 percent of incoming tourists to the country are health tourists (Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts website) (Mohammadi, 2022).

Furthermore, the growth of health tourism has led the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts to prioritize the exploitation of this growing and competitive market by establishing a health tourism committee and providing special support for it. Our country benefits from attractions in all three categories of health tourism: therapeutic, wellness, and medical, a feature less commonly seen among Iran's competitors, which can significantly enhance the value of the service package offered to tourists (Mohammadipour & Mazroui, 2021). Due to the lack of a comprehensive and coordinated health tourism system in the country and the fact that hospitals are currently not required to report the number of their patients to the Ministry of Health, there is no accurate data on foreign patients treated in Iran. Likewise, there is no precise data on those traveling to Iran for the use of facilities such as hydrotherapy centers. In this context, commercial strategies in health tourism are a

central factor for success in the health tourism industry, and the leading countries are those that meet the needs of these tourists through strong commercial and appropriate marketing strategies. Indeed, focusing on strategies, especially with a commercial orientation, is about finding the path. As the environment becomes more turbulent, strategy (planning) must be more flexible and responsive (Majedi & Shayegh, 2021). When businesses face unforeseen threats from the business environment and new opportunities arise in the environment, strategy acts as a "compass" guiding a business through stormy seas. With the shift from the traditional economy and the intensification of competition, the sustainability of organizations and markets depends on identifying and attracting new customers and retaining existing ones (Zahmatkesh Saredorahi et al., 2020). This crucial task is achievable through the correct and proper use of commercial strategies. Tourism is an information-based activity; therefore, places and tourism products heavily depend on their introduction, description, and presentation of capabilities and facilities (Abdolvand & Bani Asadi, 2019). Businesses are rapidly changing with digital transformations. These changes affect companies' strategies and lead to a shift from piecemeal actions towards the development of strategy towards its continuous development during design and execution. Companies need comprehensive strategic capabilities to continuously identify internal and external strategic developments. In large companies, strategy development has moved towards sustainable orientations.

Based on the 2025 vision, Iran aims to attract about 20 million foreign tourists by the end of this year. Considering its advantages and capabilities in health tourism, especially medical tourism, including low cost and unparalleled quality of medical services, Iran intends to utilize the existing opportunities; on the other hand, it faces significant challenges in exploiting its capabilities in this field. Therefore, alongside the need for macro planning for investment in health tourism, planning and having specific strategies for designing and implementing comprehensive models also seem essential.

Accepting the premise that health tourism impacts Iran's commercial development and that the change in macro and micro domestic and foreign policies of managers is influenced by various factors that need to be explored and analyzed, considering the differences mentioned. To date, many models and theories have been presented by researchers to explain health tourism and medical tourism and how to evaluate and measure it. However, most of these

models and patterns lack comprehensiveness. Based on this, understanding the dimensions and components of health tourism is deemed a prerequisite to achieving a health tourism model that aligns with the country's needs, based on the fundamental transformation document of the health sector and the objectives governing society. One reason for not addressing this important issue in recent research is the scarcity of many studies. In most research, positivist paradigms are more visible and the most commonly used scientific approach to recent studies. In this research, we believe that if research is conducted qualitatively and utilizes top scholars in the humanities familiar with educational issues, sociological sciences, and leadership, this concept (health tourism with a strategic business orientation) will change into a measurable and tangible term, leading to the development of a theory on this matter. The innovative aspects of this research include methods of extracting meaning and concepts related to health tourism with a strategic business orientation. This is because, in most research, quantitative aspects are used to extract concepts, while this research is derived from semi-structured interviews with professors and managers in the tourism, health, and treatment sector. Additionally, the use of MAXQDA software can be considered the application of

world-class technology and technology in constructing the theories of this research. On the other hand, extracting practical dimensions and components for how to operate health tourism with a strategic business orientation is practical.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Authors Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Ethics principles

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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